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ABSTRACT

The migrant lifestyle, in which a student moves to a new school nearly three times per year, destroys the continuity of educational programs and contributes to abnormally high dropout rates. Educational testing can help improve educational continuity for migrant students by yielding valuable information about their levels of skills mastery so they can be placed at appropriate instructional levels. Three types of educational tests are in use: norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests, and locator tests. Although often misused to measure short term academic gains, locator tests can quickly place migrant children within three months of their work level. One locator test, the Zip Test, is designed specifically for migrant students. It uses familiar experiences to allow individual assessment of English language facility and rapid and reasonably accurate placement of children aged 5 to 12 in math and reading. Test bias and research problems make many tests inappropriate for minority migrant children. Conducting the longitudinal research necessary to establish a test's validity and reliability for migrant students is extremely difficult because of the students' high mobility. (NEC)

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MIGRANT EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

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Educational Testing for Migrant Students

by

Susan Anne Bagby

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MIGRANT EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

EDUCATIONAL TESTING FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS

DOES THE MIGRANT LIFESTYLE CAUSE PARTICULAR EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS?

Yes. Migrancy destroys the continuity of educational programs and contributes to abnormally high dropout rates.

The average migrant student moves to a new school nearly three times per year. Some move as many as six or eight times (6). Each time the child moves, he faces the social and emotional strain of relocation, the difficulties of readjustment to a new academic program, and the probability of academic misplacement in that program. Although some achievement data moves with those students enrolled in the Migrant Student Record Transfer System, none moves with those who are not enrolled. With no way to assess the students' mastery of academic skills, teachers often unintentionally misplace the students in school. Misplaced migrant students waste what little time they spend in school reviewing skills they have already mastered.

Educational systems are challenged to provide a learning program for a mobile group. Most school systems apparently lack the ability to advance a migrant child to the next grade level (7). A Department of Health, Education, and Welfare study reveals that it takes approximately three years for the average migrant student in California and Texas to move the one grade level from the third to the fourth grade. The result is a confused, over-aged, and under-achieving student with very poor attitudes toward school. Most migrant students don't stay in school past the 8th grade. They have only a 40% chance of entering the 9th grade and a slim 11% chance of entering the 12th grade. Ninety percent do not graduate from high school (2, p.113-114).

CAN APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL TESTING HELP ALLEVIATE SOME OF THESE PROBLEMS?

Yes. Appropriate educational testing can help improve educational continuity for migrant students by yielding valuable information about their levels of skills mastery. Armed with this information, teachers can place migrant students at instructional levels more suited to their needs. A good diagnostic test can help a teacher place children within two weeks of their work level (10). The students can then learn new skills in sequence. Thus, even though program and curriculum continuity may be lost when the migrant child moves, skill continuity can be maintained. If migrant students are suitably challenged, their attitudes towards school may improve. Perhaps they will stay in school longer.

ARE EDUCATIONAL TESTS AVAILABLE FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS?

Yes. Three types of educational tests are in use: norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests, and locator tests.

Norm-referenced tests, widely used before the mid-seventies, yield information about broad coverage of a subject and reflect where a student stands in relation to others. They are the subject of much debate. Critics of norm-referenced tests claim that minority and disadvantaged students are underrepresented in the test development and standardization process. The critics also claim that because the tests contain so few easy items, they are insensitive to the academic growth of low-achieving students (6). However, supporters of this testing approach claim that many of the problems with norm-referenced tests stem from improper use of the information they provide (5). While the tests can be very useful in indicating the student's potential for achievement in a mainstream educational program, they do not indicate his mastery of certain skills in an absolute sense (8). Norm-referenced tests are of limited use to the teacher who wants to place a migrant student at the correct instructional level (7).

Criterion-referenced tests, on the other hand, assess a student's performance on a hierarchy of specific skills in a particular subject area. If a student is compared at all, it is to his own previous performance on the test. Teachers can use criterion-referenced tests to conduct diagnostic evaluations of the student, to obtain explicit information about his skills and abilities, and to determine the correct placement level for the child.

Teachers who have used a criterion-referenced testing approach have found they can save valuable teaching time otherwise lost by misplacement. The teachers have also found that migrant students are more enthusiastic, have more feelings of accomplishment, and have fewer attendance problems when they are placed according to criterion-referenced test results (7).

However, criterion-referenced testing is not without its problems. It tends to be expensive and the testing process itself takes a long time (7,10).

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Faster but somewhat less accurate student placement can be obtained with locator tests, which usually focus on reading and math skills. While a more time-consuming diagnostic test can place children within two weeks of their work level, a five-minute locator test can place them within three months of their work level. Such rapid placement can be extremely useful when children enroll without any records in a new school or when teaching time is at a premium, such as in a summer program. Unfortunately, locator tests are often misused. Although they are not designed to be used on a test-retest basis, locator tests are frequently used instead of criterion-referenced tests to measure short term academic gains (10).

HAVE ANY EDUCATIONAL TESTS BEEN EVALUATED FOR USE WITH MIGRANT STUDENTS?

Yes. In 1972, nine commonly used norm-referenced tests written between 1954 and 1964 were compared and evaluated for use with Mexican American migrant students in grades 1-7. The tests were rated for examinee appropriateness, measurement valifity, normed technical excellence, and administrative usability. Of the nine tests, only the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (1968 version), the Sequential Test of Educational Progress (1956—57 version), and the SRA Achievement Series (1954-64 version) (5).

More recently, in 1979, the one-year stability coefficients of six well-standardized psychological tests were investigated for Mexican American migrant children. Of the six, three were measures of intelligence: the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), and the Goodenough-Harris Draw a Person Test (DAP). One, the Wide-Range Achievement Test (WRAT), was a measure of academic achievement. The stability coefficients obtained for Mexican American migrant children were statistically significant and were similar to those obtained for the normative groups. However, some WISC-R measurements of non-verbal skills were not stable. This result supports previous findings that intelligence tests in English which emphasize the use of language are invalid indices of intelligence for Spanish-speaking Spanish-surnamed groups. The WRAT was found to be stable in the reading and spelling subtests but not in the arithmetic subtest. Researches conclude that the WRAT is inappropriate for determining the achievement level of Mexican American migrant children, although it is widely used for that purpose (4).

Results of another 1979 study suggest that teacher ratings can be a viable measure of migrant students' English language oral proficiency. Teacher ratings can be used if the data are to be grouped for analysis. However, teacher ratings should not be used in a clinical analysis to diagnose the language difficulties of individual children (3).

ARE MOST EXISTING EDUCATIONAL TESTS APPROPRIATE FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN?

No. Test bias and research problems make many tests inappropriate for minority migrant children.

The issue of test bias is particularly significant where norm-referenced tests are concerned. Basically, such tests can discriminate against children who are different. Test items can be biased because the thoughts and preconceptions of the test writers differ from those of minorities and because the process of item selection usually doesn't include minority subjects (5). Tests that have validity for white, middle-class children may have little or none for disadvantaged, migrant children, especially those who are culturally different (1). Test bias is also reflected in language. Minority children are far more likely to use a non-standard English dialect, yet many tests of English language proficiency penalize for non-standard usage (3).

The same factors that adversely affect migrant education also impede the research to improve it. Conducting the longitudinal research necessary to establish a test's validity and reliability for migrant students is extremely difficult (4). Data collection poses enormous problems. The students are constantly moving, often along new migrant routes that separate them from the rest of the research population. It is virtually impossible to associate a migrant student with a single educational program per year. Time intervals between pre- and post-tests differ and tests dates vary. In addition, many migrant students simply quit school and can no longer be included in the research. The most mobile children are the ones who can benefit the most from research regarding migrant education. Unfortunately, they are also the ones who are most frequently excluded from research efforts because of incomplete date (6).

HAVE ANY EDUCATIONAL TESTS BEEN WRITTEN ESPECIALLY FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS?

Yes. The Zip Test, a locator test, is of particular importance to educators of migrant children. It determines rapidly and reasonably accurately the placement of children aged 5 to 12 in math and reading. It also assesses their English language facility. The Zip Test is based on experiences familiar to migrant children.Teachers can use the Zip Test to determine the instructional level at which a student can effectively usa a math book and a reader, but they should not use the test to determine chronological grade placement (9). The Zip Text must be administered individually and takes just a short time, often only about five minutes.

IS MORE INFORMATION AVAILABLE REGARDING EDUCATIONAL TESTING FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS?

Very little. Some additional information is available in the ERIC data base. However, most existing studies are somewhat dated and significant research is needed

Further information about specific tests used with Mexican American groups can be found in *A Guide to Assessment Instruments for Limited English Speaking Students* (Pletcher, Locks, Reynolds, and Sisson. New York: Santillana Publishing Company, 1978). It contains reviews and evaluations of many tests used with limited English speaking students, such as native speakers of Portuguese, French, Navajo, and Chinese. The section for native speakers of Spanish contains reviews of 99 tests designed to measure language dominance; Spanish and English proficiency; achievement in math, sciences, social studies, ethnic studies, and multi-subject areas; attitudes and self -concept; learning styles, and general and scholastic ability. Two of the tests are designed for migrant students. The reviews describe the purpose, grade range, target ethnic group, administration, scoring, cost, and source of each test. The reviews include technical information regarding the test's validity and reliability as well as cultural and linguistic information regarding its appropriateness for the target group.

ERIC invites authors of related journal articles, instructional materials, theses, conference papers, speeches, program reports,and other materials to submit them for inclusion in the ERIC data base. Pertinent materials may be sent to the attention of Manuela Quezada-Aragon at:

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